

DEMAND FOR FEE-ACCESS LEASING BY HUNTERS AND TRAPPERS IN NEW YORK

by

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INTRODUCTION

Throughout the northeastern U.S., access to private lands plays a crucial role in meeting demands for hunting and other wildlife-related recreation activities (Jahn 1989, Wright 1989, Wright et al. 1988). Although limited current data exist, it is generally accepted by knowledgeable wildlife and outdoor recreation professionals that the amount of private lands available for wildlife-related recreation has continued to decrease (for earlier studies see Brown et al. 1983, Brown and Thompson 1976). These decreases are perceived to be due to a combination of (1) increased urbanization and suburbanization which has changed the use of thousands of once-huntable acres, and (2) increased posting and control of access by a gradually changing group of landowners that is less likely to hunt or to allow others to use their lands for hunting than in previous decades.

Previous studies have documented that the majority of hunters prefer to hunt on private lands, and that many hunters would be willing to pay for access to suitable private lands for hunting (Decker and Brown 1979). Again, current studies of the degree of difficulty hunters encounter or perceive in obtaining hunting access to private lands do not exist. However, in some areas of New York the amount of unposted private lands is known to be scarce. As a result of this perceived shortage of huntable acreage in parts of New York, Human Dimensions Research Unit (HDRU) staff hypothesized that a market for leasing or fee hunting may currently exist, and that landowners in parts of the state may already be engaging in this practice in significant numbers.

If leasing or fee hunting were becoming a trend in New York, it would be of interest to Cornell University's College of Agriculture and Life Sciences not only from the research perspective of implications toward wildlife management and hunter behavior, but also to Cornell Cooperative Extension from the point of view of a possible alternative income source for rural landowners, many of whom (especially agriculturalists) experienced severe financial difficulties in recent years. As a result of this interest, a small amount of federal Hatch funding was obtained through the Cornell University Agricultural Experiment Station to examine the amount of leasing or fee hunting currently existing, and the degree of hunters' and landowners' interest in leasing. It should be noted that leasing for hunting is quite prevalent in the southern U.S., and that it extends north into Maryland for waterfowl hunting.

This overall study was conducted in three phases to provide baseline information needed to: (1) evaluate the potential of fee-access policies for hunting as a supplemental revenue source for landowners, (2) assess the level of need for extension programs to help landowners make informed personal decisions about their hunting access policies, and (3) approximate the demand for fee-access opportunities by hunters and trappers. In Phase I, a preliminary survey of key informants was conducted to estimate the prevalence of fee-access leasing in all New York counties (Siemer et al. 1988). The key informants, which included Cornell Cooperative Extension agents, NYSDEC wildlife biologists and environmental conservation officers (ECO's), and local FWMA representatives, indicated several counties where they felt that a substantial amount of leasing or fee hunting may already exist or be increasing

rapidly. Based on those results, two counties (Sullivan and Saratoga) were chosen for a Phase II pilot study in which samples of landowners were interviewed to characterize fee-access arrangements and assess landowner interest in providing fee-access opportunities to hunters (Siemer et al. 1990). In that study, <3% of landowners reported a current fee-access arrangement, and 6% indicated interest in leasing or fee hunting for the coming year. The leading reasons for limited interest included liability concerns, concerns about property damage by hunters, the free access tradition that has existed for hunting, and conflicts with personal recreation interests. However, one-third of these landowners indicated that they did not have sufficient information about fee-access practices.

In the third and final phase of the study, we have analyzed the portions of three recent studies of hunters and trappers dealing with their interest in fee-access opportunities. In this report we present the findings from the final stage of this study, synthesize the information gained from previous study phases, and discuss the implications of these findings for extension education, public access policies, and further monitoring of access practices on private lands.

METHODS

Three types of potential lessors in New York State were studied for this third phase: (1) waterfowl hunters, (2) deer hunters, and (3) trappers. Questions regarding leasing activity and reasons for paying for access were added to questionnaires administered by the HDRU in studies of these 3 audiences during 1989-90.

Waterfowl Hunters

Three types of waterfowl hunters (continuous, sporadic and dropout) were surveyed in the spring and summer of 1989 (Enck and Decker 1990). Continuous waterfowl hunters (n=365) were surveyed by mail, while sporadic (n=630) and dropout (n=505) waterfowl hunters were surveyed by telephone. Useable questionnaires were returned by 255 continuous waterfowl hunters (71%). Of the 630 sporadic waterfowl hunters, 64% (n=404) completed the telephone interview; 79% of the dropouts completed the telephone interview (n=400).

Deer Hunters

A systematic sample of 5,965 big game license holders was selected from all license buyers for the 1989-90 license year. Mail questionnaires were sent to the sample in May 1990. Questionnaires were returned by 3,539 people yielding a 61% response rate after exclusion of undeliverables and nonusables. Respondents were grouped by region of residence and aggregate weighting was done to report results at the statewide level.

Trappers

One thousand trapping license holders were randomly selected from the population of 1989-90 license holders. Mail questionnaires were sent to the sample in April 1990. Questionnaires were returned by 718 people yielding a 74% response rate after exclusion of undeliverables and nonusables.

RESULTS

Waterfowl Hunters

Few waterfowl hunters of any type hunted on private land where a fee was charged (Table 1). Fewer still (<5%) preferred to hunt on such land. The sample size of those who did pay for access was too small to permit further analysis.

For continuous waterfowl hunters, those who preferred private versus public lands were compared (Table 2). The majority of those who preferred private land did so because of perceptions that private land held fewer, but more ethical hunters. Lower hunter density was cited most often as the single most important reason why private land was preferred. In contrast, those who preferred to hunt on public land felt that these lands afforded better habitat, more waterfowl, and better law enforcement.

Table 1. Percent of different types of waterfowl hunters who hunted or preferred to hunt on private-pay land in 1988-89.			
Type of waterfowl hunter	Hunted at least 1 day on private-pay land	Hunted >50% of time on private-pay land	Prefer to hunt on private-pay land
	Percent		
Continuous (n=255)	13.6	4.4	2.5
Sporadic (n=404)	4.6	3.3	2.3
Dropout (n=400)	3.2	2.0	3.5

Table 2. Reasons why continuous waterfowl hunters prefer public or private land.

Reasons for Preference	Type of property preferred			
	Private (n=178)		Public (n=63)	
	Percent checking reason*	Most important reason	Percent checking reason	Most important reason
Fewer hunters	90.4	50.0	25.4	12.8
Hunters' behavior is more ethical	70.8	28.3	14.3	8.5
Better habitat	43.8	7.9	68.3	29.8
More waterfowl	39.3	7.2	47.6	19.1
Better law enforcement	7.9	0.7	52.4	14.9
Other reasons	13.6	5.9	24.2	14.9
*Responses may add to more than 100% because respondents could check more than 1 reason.				

Deer Hunters

Like waterfowl hunters, few deer hunters paid to hunt on private lands (Table 3). Eight percent of New York State resident hunters and 10% of nonresident hunters spent at least one day hunting on private-pay lands; similar percentages indicated a preference for hunting on such lands. Slight regional differences were found, with higher percentages of Adirondack and New York City area residents paying to hunt, followed by nonresidents and Catskill-area residents.

Socio-demographic characteristics were compared for New York State residents who could be classified as spending most of their time hunting on a specific land type (Table 4). Those hunting on private land for free were more likely to live in

Table 3. Percent of deer hunters by region who hunted or preferred to hunt on private-pay land and mean days hunted on private-pay land in 1989.

	Hunted at least 1 day on private-pay land	Hunted >50% of time on private-pay land	Prefer to hunt on private-pay land	If hunt private-pay land, mean # days hunted private-pay land
Area	Percent			Mean
New York State Residents (n=2,946)	8	5	8	9.0
Adirondacks (n=673)	16	10	15	11.3
Catskills (n=741)	9	6	8	9.3
Central & Western (n=776)	4	2	4	8.2
New York City Area (n=698)	13	10	12	6.7
Nonresidents (n=362)	10	9	10	8.3

Table 4. Place of residence and mean age of New York State resident deer hunters by land type hunted most of the time in 1989.				
	Hunted >50% on land type			
	Public land (n=501)	Private-free lands (n=1,814)	Private-pay lands (n=156)	No specific type (n=457)
Place of Residence in 1989	Percent			
Rural or small village	47.9	67.0	44.7	54.4
Small to large city	52.1	33.0	55.3	45.6
Mean Age	39	41	43	46

rural areas, whereas those hunting on public land or private-pay land were somewhat more likely to live in urban areas ($\chi^2 = 90.1$, $df = 3$, $P < 0.05$). No difference in mean age was found among hunters of these 3 land-use types.

Most deer hunters preferred private lands that they hunted on for free (Table 5). The majority of those who preferred private-free land indicated an established landowner contact. Like waterfowl hunters, these deer hunters preferred private lands primarily due to concerns about the density and behavior of other hunters.

The sample size of deer hunters who paid a fee for using private lands is just large enough to draw some preliminary inferences from Table 5 about this limited market of hunters, which is approximately 7.7% statewide. Compared to other hunters who prefer private lands but do not pay a fee, these fee-paying hunters apparently are not more likely to think that they are getting better deer habitat or areas that actually

Table 5. Reasons given by New York State resident deer hunters for preferring to hunt deer on public, private for free, or private for pay land.

	Type of land preferred for deer hunting					
Reason for Preference	Public Land (n=379)		Private for free (n=2,026)		Private for pay (n=202)	
	% checking*	% most important	% checking	% most important	% checking	% most important
Fewer hunters	20.9	9.9	86.4	42.9	90.8	36.2
Be with safer hunters	13.5	1.7	49.3	18.2	69.9	32.0
Better deer habitat	39.2	14.4	47.5	8.6	45.7	4.6
Permission from landowner	5.5	0.7	64.6	10.1	17.9	1.6
More deer	23.8	6.1	39.8	7.7	41.8	8.0
Don't have to ask permission	70.7	39.1	8.3	0.4	19.2	1.3
Be with more ethical hunters	10.8	0.2	33.6	3.0	54.6	10.8
Better law enforcement	34.9	10.3	6.5	0.4	15.3	0.4
No cost	49.1	5.5	35.3	1.1	2.4	0.0
Other	17.0	12.1	14.2	7.6	12.6	5.2
		100.0		100.0		100.0

*Responses may add up to more than 100% because respondents could check more than 1 reason.

contain more deer. Rather, they are more likely to indicate that areas where they are hunting for a fee have fewer, safer, and more ethical hunters.

Among deer hunters who preferred public lands, reluctance to ask landowners for permission to hunt appeared to be a very important factor. This reason was checked by 70.7% of those preferring public lands, far more frequently than any other reason; 39.1% indicated that it was the most important of all reasons checked.

Trappers

Fewer trappers than hunters spent time on leased land. In the 1989-90 season only 4% of trappers spent some portion of the trapping season on leased land. Of these, 36% spent all of their time trapping on leased land. On average, trapping lessors divided their time, spending 59% of it on leased land. Differences in land-type preferences, reasons for trapping, and socio-demographic characteristics between those using leased land and other trappers could not be investigated because of the small number ($n=14$) of current-year trappers who trapped on leased land.

Active trappers were also questioned about the factors they would be willing to pay an access fee to obtain. A majority of trappers indicated some willingness to pay for access to land that was familiar, required minimal travel distance, had high furbearer populations, and was used by few other trappers (Table 6). Fewer trappers expressed a willingness to pay for access for other reasons.

Table 6. Percent of respondents who trapped in 1989-90 who would be willing to pay for access by type of land attribute.	
Trapping Land Attribute	Percent of respondents who trapped in 1989-90 who would be willing to pay for access (n=325)
Land where furbearer populations are high	23.1
Reduce the likelihood of trap tampering or theft	21.5
Secure a guaranteed place to trap	15.7
Avoid other trappers	9.5
Work the same area I have trapped before	7.4
Avoid conflict with people opposed to trapping	6.5
Land close to home	4.3
Land where trapline would be easily accessible by road	4.0
Avoid hunters	4.0
Other attributes	1.8

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

Despite indications that the amount of private land available to hunters is decreasing (e.g., Resources For the Future 1983), the data from statewide studies of hunters and trappers in New York does not support the proposition that these decreases have created substantial unmet demand for fee-access opportunities. Some evidence exists to suggest that demand for fee-access opportunities has increased slightly (U.S. Dep. of Interior 1963, Brown et al. 1978), but the payment of access fees for wildlife-related activities remains an infrequent activity engaged in by

small minorities of wildlife recreation participants in New York.

Based on preliminary research with key informants, we expected study phase II to reveal that 5-10% of the landowners in Saratoga and Sullivan Counties charged a fee for hunting access. Less than 2% said they offered fee-access opportunities. This unexpectedly low rate of fee-access activity may be a result of inaccurate information from key informants, under-reporting of the activity by landowners, or both.

Comments by respondents and those who refused to be interviewed indicated that some landowners were distrustful of the interviewers. The sensitive nature of questions related to income, especially income that may not have been reported for purposes of taxation, may have contributed to a response bias and under-reporting of leasing activity. Therefore, it may not be possible at this time to assess accurately leasing activity through voluntary landowner reports.

The frequency of access leasing among private nonindustrial landowners in the 2 pilot study counties was similar to that found by Wright et al. (1988) in a national landowner study. Interest in permitting access to hunters for a fee in the coming year (1990) was also found to be low in these areas (<6% of all landowners). Thus, the findings from that study did not provide strong evidence of the need for a statewide study of fee-access hunting arrangements at this time.

It would be easy to conclude from these data that no ground swell of interest in fee hunting exists on the part of either landowners or hunters. We would encourage a more cautious interpretation, however. An expansion of the sample data would lead to the conclusion that approximately 31,000 to 51,000 deer hunters in New York are

paying fees for at least some of the lands they use to hunt. A 1977 study in New York found that 56% of big game hunters and 53% of small game and waterfowl hunters would be willing to pay at least a minimal day-use fee for hunting, assuming "good" (but otherwise undefined) hunting conditions (Decker and Brown 1979). Thus, although a minority of hunters now pay fees to hunt on private lands, we would argue that had these findings come as the result of a market feasibility study, the results would probably portray that a limited market for fee hunting exists in New York.

We don't know how many landowners are represented by the 31,000 to 51,000 deer hunters and smaller numbers of other hunters who engage in fee hunting on private lands. It appears at this time, however, from very sparse landowner data, that the larger barrier to increased fee hunting in New York lies with the landowner or supply side, rather than the hunter or demand side of the market. Among landowners, many (probably the majority) have little if any interest, for a variety of reasons that include liability concerns, negative perceptions of hunters, a preference to use their land for their own activities, and the perception that they would earn very little by charging fees for wildlife recreation activities. Smaller numbers of landowners are at least open to the question of fee hunting, however, and may desire further information.

Future Research

Current information from insurance companies suggests that leasing or fee hunting would not be profitable to most individual landowners if they have proper insurance coverage because of the cost of the liability insurance. However, it may be

financially feasible for larger landowners or for a cooperative of adjacent landowners to obtain income from fee hunting that would exceed operating insurance costs.

Some further research on the amount of net income landowners would have to realize to become interested in fee hunting, as well as updated information on hunter willingness to pay for particular types of hunting would be useful to further defining market situations (involving both landowner and hunter interests) where fee hunting appears to be feasible.

At a different scale from further research about the market feasibility of fee hunting, updated research is needed regarding hunting access generally. Such research would determine on a regional level the difficulty of finding access to desirable private lands for hunting the major game species, and how hunters cope with these difficulties (e.g., quit hunting or hunt less, join hunting clubs, lease private lands). As fee hunting expands (we assume it is growing slowly, although we do not have research data), we need a research framework and data to evaluate its impacts. Such research would determine the degree to which fee hunting is largely positive (i.e., it brings a willing buyer and seller together and in the process produces some income for the landowner) and the degree to which it has detrimental impacts (e.g., reducing the number of people who hunt on acreage whose access is now restricted and further increasing the difficulty of finding access to private lands). This information would provide a basis for evaluating current access programs and modifying them as needed.

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